



# HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES 2022

## COLOMBIA

# Listening to the voices of victims

The events of the past few years have presented hugely complex challenges worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all, but not equally. Colombia has had to deal with the impact of the virus in the midst of increasing levels of armed conflict and violence. The country has made great strides, especially in terms of vaccinating its population against COVID-19. However, challenges remain both in achieving adequate vaccination coverage and in addressing the consequences of armed action in various parts of the country.

During 2021, teams from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Colombia gathered personal accounts from individuals and communities impacted by the six non-international armed conflicts occurring in the country right now. Their voices reflect the uncertainty and anguish in the face of a situation that reveals their undeniable resilience, but to which no human being should get used to.

Last year, I had the chance to meet some of the communities living in the Catatumbo mountains and Pacific forests and hear their stories firsthand. I was deeply moved to see the smiles on their faces, despite the pain of enduring the ravages of armed conflict. These people may live in vastly different landscapes, but they all share the same fears and the same hope of a life without fighting between armed actors.

The ICRC teams have seen with greater force the consequences of the various armed conflicts in Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca, as well as in various regions of the Colombian southeast.

The number of victims of explosive hazards has increased for the fourth consecutive year. Beyond the physical injuries caused by these hazards, the constant potential threat of explosion is taking an immense toll on the mental health of affected communities and making it difficult for them to access basic services and carry out their livelihoods.

There has also been a rise in the number of communities who have been displaced or whose movement has been restricted owing to fear and armed groups' lack of compliance with international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards.

Disregard for these norms continues to result in deaths, injuries and disappearances. This, in addition to other acts such as sexual violence, the association of children and adolescents with armed actors, the destruction of natural resources and civilian property, among others, makes the civilian population the first victim of the consequences of confrontations.

In 2021, there was additionally a regrettable record of attacks on health-care workers, facilities and vehicles, and citizens continued to be the main perpetrators. We likewise saw humanitarian assistance being hindered at times of greatest need.

I must make an emphatic appeal to armed groups and other weapon bearers, public institutions and citizens to respect the work of humanitarian organizations. Their presence in different parts of the country is fundamental

to the survival of communities in these difficult circumstances. We at the ICRC are in no doubt as to our obligation to respond to the most pressing needs of people affected by armed conflict and violence, while continuing to uphold the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

In this year of legislative and presidential elections in Colombia, we ask that those elected take into account the victims of armed conflict and violence when setting their political agendas.

These people's voices must be heard to understand the problems they face and find pragmatic solutions to help alleviate their suffering and enable them to live with dignity.

The mountains, forests and rivers of this country must also be taken into consideration and shielded from the effects of armed conflict and violence.

Regardless of who wins the elections, I would like to reaffirm our commitment to carrying out humanitarian work in Colombia – a commitment that now spans over 50 years. We shall remain firm in fulfilling our global responsibility to reach those areas most affected by various types of violence. Our almost 500 strong team of humanitarian workers, hand in hand with our colleagues at the Colombian Red Cross, will continue to do everything they can to meet the humanitarian needs arising in this country.

*All weapon bearers must respect and ensure compliance with humanitarian standards.*



**Lorenzo Caraffi**  
Head of ICRC Delegation  
in Colombia





# War should not remain the status quo in Colombia

Thousands of Colombians continue to live in the shadow of armed conflict, suffering the effects of a situation they have no control over at all.

As Colombia continued to focus on countering the health, economic, and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the humanitarian consequences in the country worsened.

According to the figures, in 2021 most of the effects derived from armed conflicts and violence reached the highest level of the last five years.

Our analysis of the situation is that there are currently six armed conflicts occurring in Colombia (see text box below), alongside other types of violence, all of which are drastically affecting people's lives. The reconfiguration of non-state armed groups and the rise in armed clashes, social control and territorial disputes have intensified pressures on the civilian population and presented new challenges for humanitarian assistance.



We also note with concern that those participating in the hostilities are taking actions that are not in line with international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards.

In 2021, this situation affected the civilian population and those who stopped participating in the hostilities through threats, homicides, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, restriction of movement, displacement, association of children and adolescents with weapon carriers, sexual violence, use of explosive hazards with indiscriminate, looting and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, among others.

Other humanitarian issues arose owing to armed groups being near to civilians and their property (for example, in houses, schools, health centres and religious sites) without applying the principle of precaution – a pillar of international humanitarian law intended to protect civilians from the effects of hostilities.

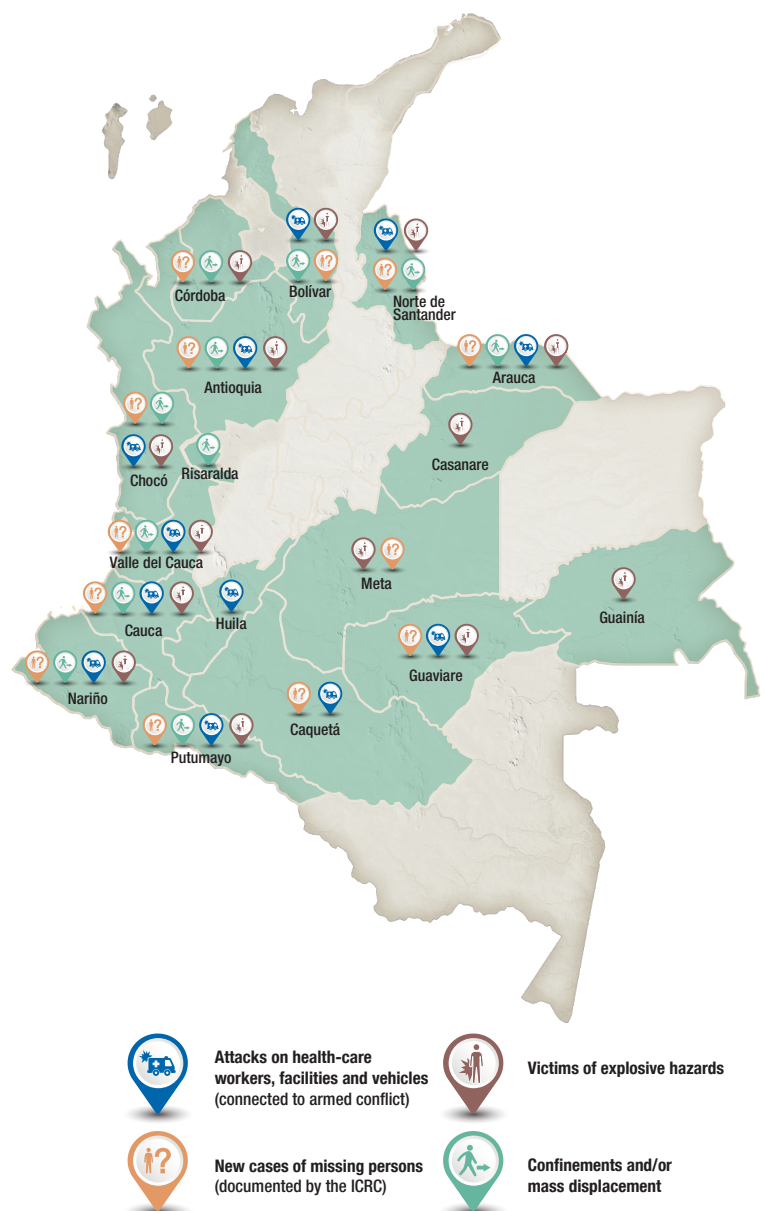
Poverty and the weak presence of the State in remote areas mean that the intensification of armed conflicts has a deeper effect on populations that are already in a situation of vulnerability.

The departments worst affected by armed conflicts and violence are Antioquia, Arauca, Bolívar, Cauca, Córdoba, Chocó, Norte de Santander, Nariño, Valle del Cauca, along with other less densely populated departments, such as Caquetá, Putumayo and Guaviare. Rural communities in these areas are overcome by fear and unable to carry out their livelihood activities or access basic services owing to the presence of explosive hazards or armed groups.

Armed conflict and violence are a feature of daily life in some urban areas too, with a direct impact on civilians.

Some urban areas are also experiencing difficult times in which armed conflicts and violence shape daily life and have direct consequences on the civilian population. Like rural communities, these urban dwellers are struggling to access health and education services, while also contending with the rising cost of food and travel.

## Humanitarian consequences in 2021



One of the most concerning humanitarian consequences we are seeing is the increase in the number of victims of explosive hazards, which in one year grew by 24% compared to 2020. It is a situation that also generates confinements and displacements, and leaves communities in fear, because walking the wrong path can change their life forever, or even take it away.

Another cause for alarm is the fact that, in 2021, we recorded 168 new cases of disappearance related to armed conflicts and violence.

At the same time, all parties to the armed conflicts are continuing to link them to their ranks, or use them as informants, among other tasks.

A lack of opportunities for young people, together with the closing of education centres due to the pandemic, is part of the problem. Weapon bearers also entice children and young people with financial incentives, incite them using alcohol and drugs, or force them to join up by threatening them or their families. These underage recruits are often completely unaware of the risks involved. Lives are destroyed and the repercussions felt by entire families and communities.

At the same time, our work in areas affected by armed conflict and violence allows us to affirm that sexual violence continues to be an invisible problematic in these places. It is used not only to intimidate and punish individuals and communities, but also sometimes as a demonstration of power and territorial control.

Although there is information about it, it is difficult to establish the real magnitude of this tragedy due to the consequences experienced by the victims, which leads them to remain silent, such as the feeling of guilt, shame, fear of retaliation, among others. This prevents those who survived from going to institutions, so it is very likely that present an underreporting in the figures and encounter difficulties in accessing care routes.



## VIOLATIONS

of international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards were documented by our team in 2021.

## To stay or to go

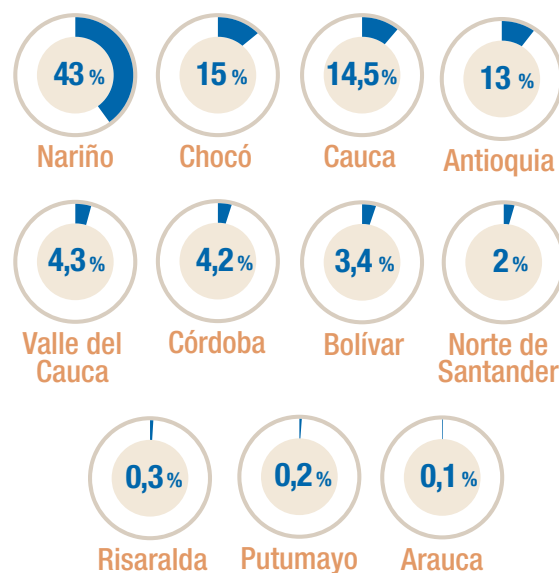
Confinement and displacement are two sides of the same coin. In both cases, people's lives are crossed by making a decision: stay or leave to survive.

In 2020, the number of people displaced or confined was already concerning. Yet, in 2021, the numbers kept rising. Official data shows that 52,880 people were affected by mass displacement, 77,568 people by individual displacement, and 45,108 people by confinements. Behind the figures lies the reality that these people's lives have been completely turned upside down.

Armed conflicts also continued to affect health workers in 2021. Figures from the national health-care board reveal that

## Mass displacement in 2021

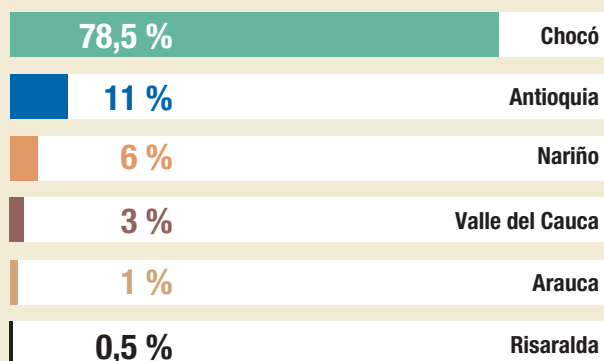
Of ten or more people



In 2021, individual displacement affected 77,568 people.  
\*As at 1 December 2021

## Confinements in 2021

45.108 people affected



Source: Seguimiento a presuntos eventos de desplazamiento masivo y confinamiento. Subdirección de Prevención y Atención a Emergencias – UARIV

18 % of attacks on health workers, facilities and vehicles were connected to armed conflicts, although severe underreporting means that the real figure could well be higher.

In light of this situation, we call on all weapon bearers in Colombia to protect those not participating in the hostilities from their effects. Compliance with international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards is not optional.

# Explosive hazards: a latent threat

In 2021, we recorded 486 victims of explosive hazards\*, the highest number in the past five years. The phenomenon is clearly worsening with a direct impact on the civilian population, since most victims are civilians.

The presence of explosive hazards in various parts of the country is leading to multiple humanitarian consequences. The most visible of these are injury, mutilation and death for direct victims, reflecting the profound suffering they can cause.

Explosive hazards injure, maim or kill indiscriminately. The majority of survivors have to endure amputations, multiple operations and lengthy periods of physical rehabilitation, as well as life-altering economic, social and psychological repercussions.

The impact is felt by their families too. For example, in recent years we have recorded cases of suicide in communities where accidents with explosive hazards have occurred. The psychosocial impact of this tragedy can destroy the very fabric of a community, which is why it is essential that victims and their families be given comprehensive care.

The level of explosive hazard contamination in Colombia is not known for sure. In the last four years, we have documented victims in 131 municipalities, spanning 21 departments. Although this is a tangible indicator, it only highlights part of what is a complex problem.

The humanitarian repercussions of the presence of these hazards also include displacement, confinements, fear and anxiety, which, though less visible, completely overshadow daily life, affecting the mental health and development of whole communities.

Of the 69 municipalities in which accidents have been recorded in the past year, 45 % have also experienced confinements and mass displacement. These phenomena were likewise seen in areas where no direct victims were recorded, but where the presence of explosive hazards is just as concerning.

It is impossible to say exactly how many students have stopped going to school because of the close proximity of an explosive hazards, or how many people have lost their livelihoods because they cannot move around freely. It is even harder to know how many communities have experienced fear, helplessness, anxiety or psychological suffering as a result of the constant but silent threat posed by explosive hazards.

The dimension of this situation goes beyond numbers, therefore, it is essential to understand the stories and the suffering behind this reality.

\*This figure includes victims of various types of explosive hazards, such as anti-personnel mines, explosive remnants of war, launched explosives and controlled detonation hazards.





# Missing persons: A humanitarian tragedy that must not be forgotten

Thousands of families in Colombia continue to experience the uncertainty and agony of not knowing the fate or whereabouts of a loved one, despite the fact that, in many cases, they went missing several years or even decades ago.

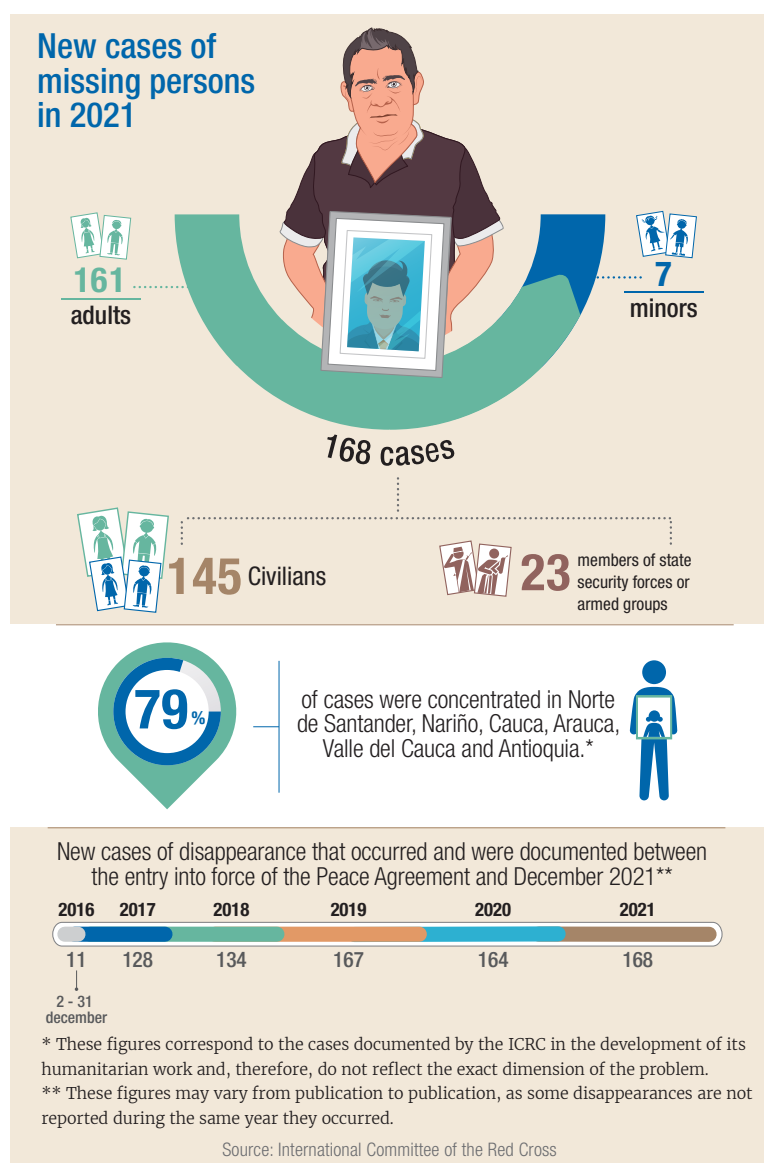
Meanwhile, new cases of missing persons continue to be reported across the country and the measures that have been implemented to prevent this are insufficient. Proof of this is that in 2021 we documented every two days, on average, a new case of disappearance related to armed conflicts and violence.

Analyses of the situation indicate that all armed actors continue to practice enforced disappearance, most often to instil fear in the civilian population. However, there are other cases in which weapon carriers are responsible for disappearances simply by failing to properly manage the remains and details of people who die in connection with armed conflicts and violence.

In the midst of this humanitarian tragedy is the suffering of relatives, who, beside of facing an indescribable pain and a deterioration in their mental health, also continue facing multiple obstacles to access care routes, such as legal barriers to access institutional services, the weak presence of the State in the most remote areas and a fear of families to approach the authorities in places where the violence is particularly intense.

On the other hand, there is the collective search model\*\*\* that has been implemented through the regional plans by the Missing Persons Search Unit (UBPD). This new paradigm, although it is ideal given the magnitude and complexity of the problem in the country, it fails to be operational due to the lack of coordination between state institutions and their commitment to support and strengthen the collective search.

There are challenges too when it comes to actually using the resources available for establishing the whereabouts of missing persons. The Urgent Search Mechanism, for example, is fit for purpose but often used incorrectly. This is a mechanism whereby authorities can order the



A woman receives psychosocial support from the ICRC while the bodies of her three brothers are being recovered in rural Córdoba. This support will continue to be offered to her and her family whether the identity of these men is confirmed or not.

immediate start of proceedings necessary to locate a missing person. However, for no apparent reason, some families are still being told that they must wait 72 hours before initiating this process.

Another example is the collective search model\*\*\* introduced by the Missing Persons Search Unit through regional plans. Though seemingly ideal for addressing the magnitude and complexity of the issue of disappearance, this new model is yet to become operational owing to a lack of coordination between state institutions and their commitment to supporting and strengthening collective searches.

Searching for missing persons currently brings multiple and complex challenges. There therefore needs to be a political will to prioritize addressing the problem and responding to the needs of affected families.

Indifference cannot continue to be society's response to a tragedy that has already touched the lives of thousands and is still occurring today.

\*\*\*The cases of missing persons are grouped and associated by common elements such as the dynamics of the armed actors, the context and temporality. This allows information from one case to complement that of another and be useful for searching for different people.

# Health care in danger

It is becoming increasingly dangerous to deliver health care in Colombia, especially in areas worst affected by armed conflicts and violence. Attacks on health-care workers, facilities and vehicles have increased considerably over the past three years. In 2021, the national health-care board recorded 553 such attacks, which is 70 % more than in 2020.

Health workers have been attacked by civilians and weapon bearers alike. The accumulation of fear and fatigue is starting to impact on these workers' mental health, which in turn is making it more difficult for people to access health care.

The most serious incidents include homicides, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, assaults and threats. There have also been reports of stigmatization, violations of patient confidentiality and professional secrecy, material damage to health-care facilities, and being forced to treat a patient regardless of priority, among others.

Also highlighted this year, due to social mobilizations, is the obstruction of ambulances, health personnel and medical supplies, which represents 56% of all attacks.

The majority of attacks and incidents (66 per cent) were at the hands of civilians, including members of the community, patients and their relatives – a number elevated by the protests that took place over the course of the year.

Formal reports of attacks perpetrated by weapon bearers have also risen, representing 20 % of all cases. However, ICRC is certain that many incidents go unreported for fear of repercussions.

Such underreporting in the midst of armed conflicts not only makes it difficult to establish the true scale of the problem, but

also means that the most serious incidents go unnoticed and the impact unaddressed. Some health workers carry out their duties in a fearful silence, not only to save their own lives and their family's, but also to be able to keep treating those most in need. Some quit their jobs, out of fear or exhaustion.

According to information we gathered in areas worst affected by armed conflicts, there were, for example, cases of arbitrary deprivation of liberty, of people bringing weapons into hospitals and demanding priority treatment, and of people entering emergency rooms to kill suspected enemies.

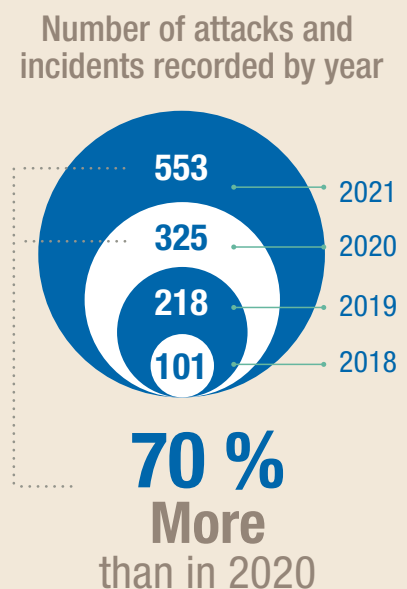
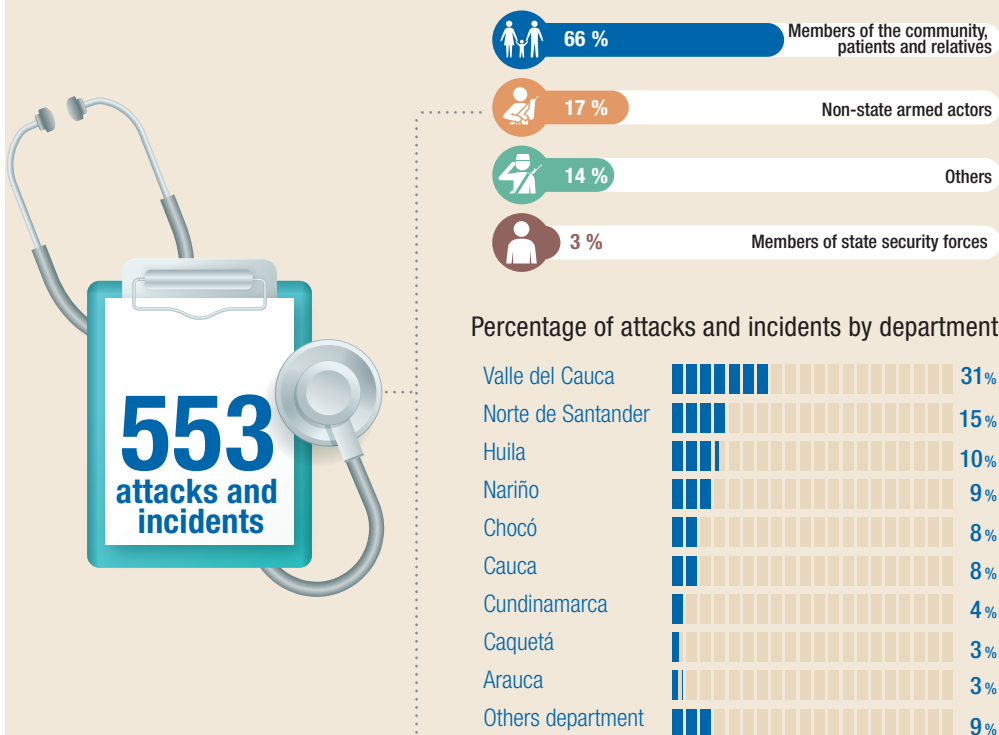
In addition, we found that increasing numbers of health workers in these areas are reporting being subjected to threats and extortion.

These incidents, as well as damage inflicted on health-care infrastructure during armed clashes, suggest that weapon bearers are failing to comply with the principle of precaution set out in international humanitarian law.

This has serious consequences for the sick and wounded. Health-care workers often quit their jobs and leave badly affected areas as soon as they can, leaving the most vulnerable without medical attention in the midst of a crisis and making it difficult for them to exercise their fundamental right to health care.

Delivering health care should not be a dangerous or courageous activity. We urge all weapon bearers and civilians to respect health workers under all circumstances. We also urge state institutions to redouble their efforts to protect and support health-care professionals, especially in those areas most affected by armed conflict and violence.

## Attacks on health-care workers, facilities and vehicles in 2021





# Prisons

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to complications in many detention facilities in Colombia. Not only have there been outbreaks of the virus among detainees, but also visiting restrictions have meant that detainees have had less contact with family members, lawyers, judges and human rights workers, among others.

These restrictions have also negatively affected the quality of certain basic services for detainees, such as food, health care and judicial guarantees.

In the midst of the pandemic, we reiterate our commitment through joint efforts with the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (INPEC) and the Colombian Red Cross, to restore contact between family members through video calls.

Female detainees fared worse than their male counterparts when it came to maintaining contact with family members, especially their children, during this time. We stress the importance of considering alternatives to imprisonment so that this measure is only resorted to when necessary. We also call on supervisory bodies and enforcement judges to resume in-person work in prisons.

In addition, the closure of the detention facilities had a direct impact on the increase in the overcrowding levels in the temporary detention centers of the country, where the adequate living conditions for prolonged stays or for so many people are not met.



In 2021, we facilitated 14,678 call services enabling detainees to contact their families.



Restoring contact between migrants and their families helps to prevent disappearance.



Dialogue with law enforcement officers is fundamental to promoting respect for humanitarian standards.

# Migration

The migrant population with a vocation to stay also settles in departments affected by armed conflicts and violence, which exposes them to danger due to their unfamiliarity with the context, but also due to rejection, stigmatization and xenophobia.

In addition, they have to negotiate various institutional barriers to access the care, assistance and reparations available to victims of armed conflict, on account of their irregular status.

Added to this are various institutional barriers that must be overcome in order to be cared for, assisted and receive reparations as victims of armed conflicts, always poorly justified due to their irregular status.

Meanwhile, problematic scenes have unfolded on the Pacific coast and in the Darién Gap, involving migrants from overseas making long, exhausting and sometimes life-threatening journeys through dense jungle and other treacherous terrains.

The ICRC welcomes the steps taken by the government to address the migrant crisis in Colombia, such as passing a temporary protection statute, which will allow migrants to seek new opportunities and participate in society and the economy.

# Use of force

At the global level, we saw increased levels of social unrest in 2021, and thousands of protesters took to the streets for different reasons. Colombia was no exception. Maintenance of public order was a constant challenge for state security forces in both urban and rural areas, testing their ability to respond in ways that respected international rules and standards on the use of force.

Allegations of a disproportionate use of force by state officials require a comprehensive response by the state. This should include improvements to operational doctrine, training, and monitoring and control mechanisms relating to the use of force by law enforcement officers.

For the ICRC it is important to continue engaging in frank and constructive dialogue with decision-makers in charge of this response, protection of the population and maintenance of public order. As part of this dialogue, we will continue to share recommendations on respecting human rights and humanitarian principles and stand ready to share our perspective on this issue.



## During the pandemic, we continued to carry out our humanitarian work in an impartial, neutral and independent manner.

Our bilateral and confidential dialogue with weapon bearers and people affected by armed conflicts and violence enabled us to reach the remotest and most inaccessible parts of the country, where no one else could.

In 2021, we helped to release 27 people held by armed groups – one of the highest numbers in recent years. We thank all parties involved for their trust in the humanitarian work of the ICRC.

In cooperation with the Colombian Red Cross, we also supported the administration of vaccines against COVID-19 in remote parts of the country and areas that were hard to reach due to armed conflict. Support was given to cover the cost of travel, food and accommodation for the 886 health-care workers who took part in this exercise, and refrigeration units for storing the vaccines were delivered to 18 health-care centres and hospitals.

## Stories from the field

### Noralba Rodríguez

Victim of armed conflicts in Norte de Santander, eastern Colombia

“The state should be more supportive of victims because there are lots of us in Colombia. Sometimes it really seems like people living nearer cities are the only ones taken into consideration. It’s really hard for those of us in remote parts of the country, which barely appear on the map. When you’re this far away, you feel so alone.”



### Onorito Chorilana

Teacher in Chocó, western Colombia

“Sometimes it’s difficult being a teacher in an area affected by armed conflict because you can’t go about your life as you did before. You have to tread carefully, with fear, and you have to avoid receiving a threat. It’s scary because you could be killed at any time.”

### Bardesley Paz

Indigenous governor in Putumayo, southern Colombia

“Hunting, fishing, eating, walking, fetching water – you limit everything you do for fear of coming across an explosive device. This also means we can’t keep watch over our land or visit sacred sites, so now we have to do this spiritually and through ceremonies.”



### Nile Adriana Melo

Daughter of someone who disappeared 20 years ago in Nariño, southern Colombia

“When a loved one goes missing, it deeply affects you both physically and emotionally. Hope is the last thing to go. You must always remember the person with the kindness, affection and youthfulness that made them who they were.”



# Calls to action

## Armed conflicts

- ✓ We urge the next government and members of congress elected in 2022 to prioritize in their political agendas the care and protection of victims and communities affected by armed conflicts and violence.
- ✓ We remind state security forces and armed groups of their strict obligation to respect international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards, and to take precautions to spare civilians and civilian objects from the effects of the hostilities.
- ✓ We urge all armed actors to consider the humanitarian impact of using and abandoning explosive hazards. These hazards affect the civilian population and lead to grave consequences, both physical and psychological. They also limit the mobility of communities and impede access to basic services, such as health care and education.
- ✓ Sexual violence is unacceptable. We call on all weapon bearers to prevent and refrain from committing acts of this type. We also remind state institutions of the importance of providing immediate attention and applying the appropriate protocols to victims, whose suffering is both physical and emotional.
- ✓ We urge the state to create more protected spaces and opportunities for young people in rural and urban areas, in order to prevent the recruitment of children and adolescents by armed groups.
- ✓ Migrants suffers the consequences of armed conflicts, just like the host population. We therefore encourage the state to take appropriate steps to ensure care, assistance and recognition for migrants as victims, to enable them to access measures provided for by law, regardless of their migrant status.
- ✓ We stress that the state must strengthen its institutional capacity to provide comprehensive care to all victims, including psychosocial and economic support. It is important that these people be treated with dignity and not be revictimized.

## Missing persons

- ✓ We call on weapon bearers to take every step necessary to prevent the disappearance of people, including by properly managing the dead. We urge them to pass on to institutions searching for missing people any useful information that may help to clarify the fate and whereabouts of people who have disappeared in the context of armed conflict and violence.
- ✓ We invite organizations responsible for addressing the issue of the missing persons to properly acquaint themselves with the Urgent Search Mechanism. We urge prosecutors and judges to activate this mechanism immediately and correctly when required.
- ✓ Coordination between state institutions is needed to support and strengthen the collective search model implemented by the Missing Persons Search Unit. Whatever the results of this year's elections, it is important that this unit continues to receive the support and resources necessary to carry out its work.

## Health care

- ✓ We call on armed actors to cease attacks on health-care workers, facilities and vehicles. These affect health professionals and patients alike, often leaving whole communities without access to health care.
- ✓ We also remind civilians of the importance of respecting and protecting health-care workers, in recognition of the essential role that they play in society, namely saving lives.
- ✓ Given that most incidents have entailed the obstruction of ambulances and medical supplies, we ask citizens to allow health-care personnel to carry out their work under all circumstances and without limitations. In emergency situations and priority cases, every second counts.

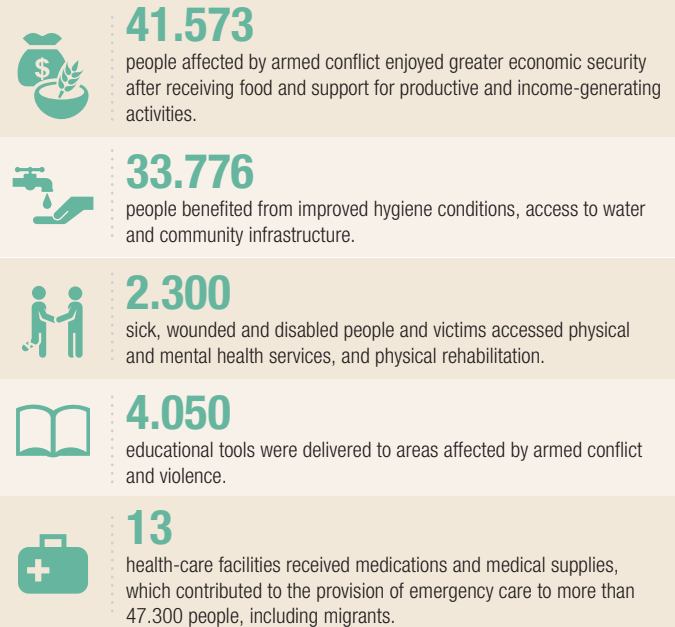


We are committed to reaching all areas badly affected by armed conflict and violence, regardless of how remote they are, to bring assistance to the people who need it most.



# In 2021, our work benefited 534.000\* people

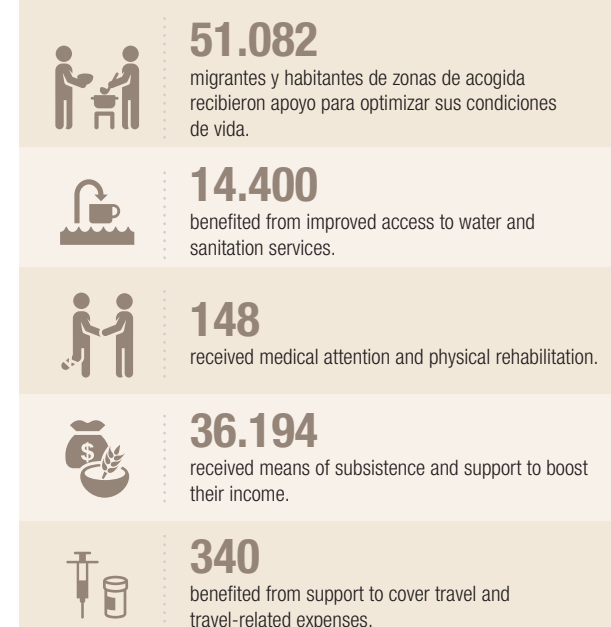
These figures represent a continued effort by our teams to help those most in need, often in cooperation with the Colombian Red Cross.



## Victims of armed conflict



## COVID-19 response



## Migrants in Colombia



*Bilateral and confidential dialogue with all weapon bearers in Colombia enables us to raise awareness of international humanitarian law and other humanitarian standards, with a view to putting limits on war.*



## Victims of explosive hazards



## Survivors of sexual violence



## Missing people



members of state security forces and the authorities were trained in international standards on the use of force, international humanitarian law and other humanitarian rules.



connectivity-related services (calls, WiFi connections and battery-charging points) were provided to help migrants and victims get in touch with their loved ones.



people being held by armed groups were released in humanitarian operations that we facilitated.



cases were presented to weapon bearers to inquire as to the fate of missing people.



call services were provided to enable people deprived of their liberty to speak to their families.

\*One person may have received more than one service.



We are a team of **474** humanitarian workers

Women  
**53 %**



Men  
**47 %**

**85 %**

Colombians

**15 %**

of 25 nationalities



Our budget in 2021 was:  
**\$ 159.657** million Colombian pesos

**We have carried out**

53 years of humanitarian  
work in **Colombia**

158 years of humanitarian  
work **worldwide**



*We help people around the world affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, doing everything we can to protect their dignity and relieve their suffering, often with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. We also seek to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.*

*People know they can count on us to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. Our experience and expertise enable us to respond quickly, effectively and without taking sides.*

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